



Fire  
Fighter

A. Dean and Jean M. Larsen  
Yellowstone Park Collection



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BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY



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United States  
Department of  
Agriculture

Forest  
Service

Region 1

Federal Building  
P.O. Box 7669  
Missoula, MT 59807

Date: March 1989

Rick Wilfert  
Sandpoint Ranger Dist  
1500 Hwy 2  
Sandpoint ID 83864

Dear Rick,

This commemorative booklet of the Northern Region's 1988 fire season was created especially for you and your colleagues who contributed to the fire management effort this past summer. Your work was truly appreciated, and this booklet comes to you with my personal thanks for your dedication and contribution.

The 1988 fire season was the worst in our Region since 1919 in total acres burned. The season was long, with days stretching into weeks. It was a frustrating experience for many. Firelines were lost and had to be rebuilt, only to be lost again. Often, reinforcements and supplies were slow in arriving. Sometimes situations were perilous. Many of you had to sacrifice important work at home, as well as vacation plans and time with your families. The long hours demanded of you on fire assignments, the weather, the smoke, and less than ideal living conditions in fire camps, could easily have discouraged a person. But complaints were few. Everyone pitched in and did their part, and persisted in the task at hand.

Working together, we met one of the more difficult challenges we have had as an agency, and we helped to perpetuate the Forest Service tradition as a "can do" outfit. I am extremely proud of our very capable and dedicated Forest Service employees; each fulfilling his or her role to make our efforts successful.

I hope you will enjoy this booklet, Rick, and share it with your family and friends. It represents my appreciation for the contribution you made to this historic event in the Northern Region.

Sincerely,

JOHN W. MUMMA  
Regional Forester



A faint, light gray watermark of classical architectural columns and a pediment is visible in the background.

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Dover & Map art by Leslie Drake Robinson  
Book Design by MC Galer



Massive smoke columns boiled into the skies across Montana, Idaho, and the Dakotas. Walls of fire scorched thousands of acres a day and flaming embers were scattered by dry winds, only to start new fires.

Two years of record-breaking drought, beginning in the fall of 1986, laid the groundwork for the 1988 fire season. Only in 1910 and 1919 were more acres burned. Conditions in the Northern Region of the Forest Service from 1986 to 1988 were characterized by lack of moisture, high temperatures, low humidity, little or no snow cover, and a dominant high pressure weather system.

There was a preview of things to come in February 1988 near Whitehall, Montana, when a wind-driven grass fire burned several structures and 1,000 acres. It resulted in the earliest use of an overhead team in the 80-year history of this Region. Before the summer ended, over four thousand fires would blacken more than a million acres on all wildlands in northern Idaho, Montana and the Dakotas.

*"It was pretty incredible—I mean, I've been doing fires since 1976, and I've been on the Bitterroot Hotshot crew since 1984, and I've never seen anything like this summer, with the fire behavior, and all of that."*

Rene Eustace,  
Bitterroot Hotshots



Photo by Larry Mayer



Photo by Larry Mayer



UPB

*"Things happened this year that, in my experience, I had never seen before, and especially at that early in the season."*

Pat Pierson,  
Forestry Technician

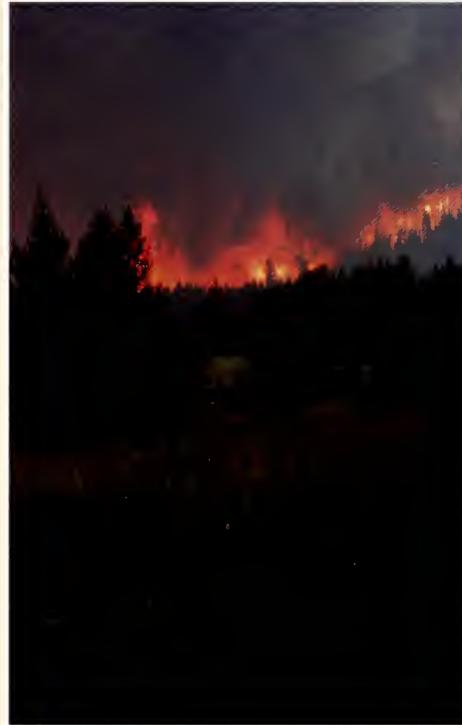


Photo by Larry Mayer



The fire season began in June when more than 100,000 acres burned in eastern Montana and the western Dakotas. The most significant fires were Early Bird on the Northern Cheyenne Indian Reservation and Brewer on the Custer National Forest. They burned 80,000 acres between them. The Brewer Fire resulted in the first of three fire shelter deployment situations. Pat Pierson, forestry technician of the Beartooth Ranger District, said of these fires, "It was incredible the things we saw. I saw fires crowning out and running eight miles during the night. Things happened this year that, in my experience, I had never seen before, and especially that early in the season." Eight fires that would ultimately require overhead teams began in June, including Storm Creek and Canyon Creek.

By July 20, the Canyon Creek and Gates Park Fires were showing new life but were being managed as prescription fires in the Scapegoat and Bob Marshall Wilderness areas respectively. Two days later, six major new starts led to the establishment, on July 24, of an expanded coordination center at the Aerial Fire Depot in Missoula. Known as the Regional Incident Coordination Organization (RICO), this organization expanded the capabilities of the Regional Coordination Center to respond to the increased workload of a major area-wide fire year. RICO continued in operation until September 20.



*"The things I saw there (Early Bird and Brewer fires) made me basically perk up and say, 'Hey, we're working with some serious fire conditions this year.'"*

Pat Pierson,  
Forestry Technician



*"There were surprises where you'd be working in an area and suddenly you'd spot [a fire] to your side—and in no time, it would go from a fire inside a hollow snag to 500 acres."*

Rene Eustace, Bitterroot Hotshots



Photo by John Nelson

*"Between the fire on both sides, they looked like rows of baked potatoes."*

Ranger Jerry Dombrowske



Supplying fire crews with equipment and tools required monumental efforts. More than 19,000,000 pounds of supplies were shipped from the Fire Cache at the Aerial Fire Depot, breaking all previous records.

The demand for crews, retardant and other resources soon exceeded supplies. The Region exhausted the national supply of pulaskis and water pumps. Dave Levesque of the Fire Cache reported, "We did run out [of pulaskis]. But we were always able to give them some of what they wanted but we weren't able to fill the orders full. You know, if they ordered 100, we'd give them 50 or 75. We mostly supplied people with what they wanted. If we didn't have it, we told them to keep ordering."

On August 16, a Regional MAC (Multi-Agency Coordination) group was activated, consisting of representatives of the National Park Service, Bureau of Land Management, Bureau of Indian Affairs, Forest Service and the three States within the Northern Region. The MAC group is the decision-making wildland fire management organization for the Northern Rocky Mountain area. They set priorities for the major incidents and promptly address problems and opportunities.

This group is activated when several agencies are simultaneously requiring fire suppression forces which exceed their individual capabilities.

*"The catering is really great—you have the option of making peanut butter sandwiches instead of ham. It may seem like a small thing, but you get sick of ham."*

Rene Eustace,  
Bitterroot Hotshots





Photo by John Nelson



Photo by John Nelson



Fire Camp: "I am still shocked—it is almost like your own little town—you have the commissary, you have the doctor's office, you have the showers. But you are really primitive."

Maureen Wolcott,  
Bitterroot Hotshots

Of the 1,422 fires on National Forests in the Northern Region, over 1,370 were suppressed by initial attack crews. With the objective of snuffing out fires while they were still small, smokejumpers and Ranger District crews hit them fast and hard when they first started. These fires failed to make the headlines, but they represented a real success story. If it had not been for the initial attack crews, the season would have been much worse.

Aaron Aylsworth, University of Montana student and first-year smokejumper, jumped onto a fire in the Salmon River Breaks on the Nez Perce National Forest. A pack of tools got caught in a tree. He tells this story: "(I) started climbing up to get the pack of tools. Got up to 30 feet. People started yelling 'Get out of the tree.' The fire is getting away from them. Then they yell to stay in the tree. The fire started climbing the tree. It got 12-15 feet up the tree. I was climbing around trying to keep out of the smoke. That's one of those days when you're wondering if you're making your money."

To beef up the initial attack effort, additional smokejumpers were brought in from Alaska (Region 10) and Forest Service Regions 4, 5, and 6. Ranger Districts also hired and trained additional personnel for ground attack.



*"It is a great act of faith and trust that the parachute is going to open."*

Aaron Aylsworth, smokejumper





*"The smoke burns your lungs. Just imagine being in a smoke-filled bar day after day, not leaving it. It is 10 times worse than that."*

Tom Connoud  
Bitterroot Hotshots



Photo by Bill Sallaz

## FIRE SEASON OF 1988

(Fires Assigned Overhead Teams)

No.	Incident	Loc.	Acres	Start	Control	No.	Incident	Loc.	Acres	Start	Control
1	Air Patrol	4K	4050	8/11	8/20	36	Jay West	3C	1586	8/25	9/19
2	Ajax	4D	150	8/17	8/20	37	Jim Town	4K	1336	7/13	7/15
3	Beartrap	4F	85	7/5	7/7	38	Kirby	4K	12,795	8/19	8/26
4	Blodgett	3C	1800	9/7	10/15	39	Ladder Creek	4B	20,480	8/13	10/24
5	Boston Lake	4B	29,520	8/23	10/24	40	Lauer	4B	380	8/19	8/25
6	Brewer	4M	51,700	6/20	6/29	41	Levi Creek	4F	145	7/21	7/25
7	Brush Coulee	4J	1500	8/10	8/12	42	Lick Creek	2F	1090	9/2	9/8
8	Cabin Creek 3 (or Peak)	2B	46	8/25	8/27	43	Little Finger	4I	2445	8/11	8/18
9	Cameron	5F	1100	8/25	8/27	44	Little Rock Creek	3C	2434	9/6	10/8
10	Camp Creek 8000 NP	4C	12,050	7/24	10/24	45	Lodgepole	1D	640	8/5	8/13
						46	Lolo Creek	3C	2230	8/25	9/5
						47	Lost Canyon	1H	4500	8/15	8/22
11	Canyon Creek	2D	240,600	6/25	11/9	48	Lulu	4K	780	8/15	8/19
12	Cedar Creek	3B	120	8/10	8/15	49	Madison Gulch	3C	1009	7/26	8/1
13	Cinnamon Creek	2N	3940	6/11	6/13	50	McMeekin	4B	1000	9/17	9/19
14	Combination	3D	11,262	8/25	9/8	51	Mike's Creek	2N	5400	7/27	8/1
15	Cook	4K	100	7/12	7/17	52	Monument Peak	2I	5774	7/22	7/29
16	Corey Flats	3I	3029	8/18	8/22	53	Opus 7	3C	1045	8/26	9/6
17	Corral Creek	4F	2860	8/29	9/6	54	Red Bench	1C	37,500	9/6	12/1
18	Crescendo	3B	170	8/25	9/3	55	Rock Creek	3C	2962	7/22	8/5
19	Deer Creek	3L	2650	6/20	6/23	56	Sandburn	2J	3000	6/6	6/9
20	Dry Fork	1B	13,051	8/25	9/16	57	Sawtooth	3C	1173	9/8	10/8
21	Dunham	2D	65	8/11	8/16	58	Schiller	4K	15,250	7/12	7/17
22	Early Bird	4K	22,000	6/5	7/14	59	Short Pine	4N	5300	6/20	7/14
23	Espy	3K	5460	8/18	8/22	60	Slick	4K	9940	8/13	8/21
24	Fantail	2N	2260	8/11	8/18	61	Smith Lake Road	1C	95	7/22	7/25
25	Flex	4L	2500	7/11	7/16	62	Snowbowl	3C	91	8/25	8/27
26	Footstool	3C	13,900	7/21	11/3	63	South Lost Horse	3C	6280	8/15	10/8
27	Freeman Trail	3C	23,220	7/21	11/3	64	Storm Creek	4G	107,847	6/14	11/4
28	Gardiner	4C	2218	6/27	11/3	65	Straight Creek	2E	466	7/22	8/1
29	Gates Park	2E	50,850	7/11	11/10	66	Sweetwater	4E	8000	8/11	8/14
30	Giles Connection	1A	140	7/31	8/2	67	Totem Peak	3C	5700	8/13	10/15
31	Girard Gulch	3E	120	8/19	8/21	68	Upper Bear	3C	7180	8/13	10/8
32	Glen Lake	3C	120	8/19	8/23	69	Upper Emery	1D	180	8/17	8/23
33	Gold Flint Mountain	4E	350	7/22	7/26	70	Warm Springs	3F	46,900	8/9	9/3
34	Hellroaring	4G	81,950	8/15	11/2	71	Whitehall	4E	1000	2/21	2/22
35	Iron Claim	2G	1475	8/24	8/27						





For those who experienced the summer of '88, vivid memories remain. Mike Paterni, Ranger at Phillipsburg, Montana, reported flames 200 feet above the tops of the trees as the Combination Fire roared through the Long John Mountains of southwestern Montana. Willis Curdy, a smokejumper with 18 years of experience, said, "I've seen fire conditions from New Mexico to Alaska, and from Minnesota to California, and there are a lot of things that happened this summer that I've never seen."

Fires usually are calmer at night. The following is a quote from a fire training manual: "At night, the air and ground cools, the air current reverses direction, humidity and fuel moisture increase and large fires are easier to control,"

(FIREFIGHTER'S GUIDE, National Wildfire Coordinating Group, 1986). Consequently, many people were on the fire lines at night. Unfortunately, 1988 was not a typical year. According to Steve Gauger, one of the incident commanders on the Canyon Creek Fire, "Fuel moistures were so low that nighttime temperatures had little effect. Fire moved as rapidly downhill at night as uphill in daytime."

At night, crews have to be even more careful of unseen threats such as falling snags, rolling rocks, and tripping hazards. According to Incident Commander Dave Poncin, "Some fires couldn't be fought at night because of dead snags from Mountain Pine Beetle and the tremendous hazard these posed to personnel."



Photo by Larry Mayer



Photo by Larry Mayer

"Usually we just get beat up a little bit until the weather changes. But this is the first time I'm aware of that we had our butts kicked for about 45 to 50 days during the fire season."

George Weldon, Resource Asst.

*"You don't get much sleep sometimes. And it's a lot like being in a war zone. You try and sleep when you can. It puts a strain on a person."*

John Dreadfulwater,  
Engine Foreman



Photo by Larry Mayer



*"The first time I heard a fire crowning out and making a run . . . you hear this big snapping, and it is just rushing through the trees . . . bearing it is something that could be one of the most scary things of all. It sounds like a train coming through."*

Jeremy Hauk,  
Initial Attack Crew



Fire crews experienced the brunt of the effort. They were in the front lines, so to speak. Rene Eustace of the Bitterroot Hotshot Crew reported; "We did 16- to 18-hour days on occasion. . . . We had to continually monitor what the fire was doing. . . . You'd be working in an area and suddenly you'd spot [a fire] to your side. In no time it would go from a small fire inside a hollow snag to 500 acres. You'd have to back off."

Maureen Wolcott of the Bitterroot Hotshot Crew said, "Everybody gets pretty grungy together, and we all go through the same exact thing . . . being tired, being dirty."

While fighting the Canyon Creek Fire, Jerry Dombrowske's crew deployed their fire shelters. "Between the fire on both sides of us, they looked like rows of baked potatoes," he said. He described his experience this way: "We saw it was going to come: We separated the gas cans and the chain saws from the people. Then we sat down for half an hour and watched the fire coming at us before we got into the shelters. . . . There were embers as big as coffee cups falling around us."

Fire fighting is always hazardous. Unfortunately, there were injuries and, sadly, two fatalities. Cheryl Old Horn Deputy lost her life in a vehicle roll-over on the Crow Indian Reservation's Brush Coulee Fire August 10. Patrick David was killed by a falling snag on Red Bench Fire September 9. In spite of this, the safety record was remarkable, considering the duration, intensity, and number of people and machines involved.



Photo by Bill Sallaz



Photo by Larry Mayer



Photo by Michael Gailacher

" . . . it didn't take a very intelligent person to figure out that when you got to a fire this year, by God, you'd better be ready for it."

Pat Pierson,  
Forestry Technician



"The flames were about a 100-foot wall. You could see anything you wanted. We didn't need too much artificial lighting to see what we were doing."

Benny Ayres, Equipment Operator



By the first week in August, activity appeared to be slowing and on August 7, the RICO organization was geared down. Our relief was short-lived, however, when the Warm Springs Fire began August 9th on the Helena National Forest and ultimately grew to 46,900 acres. Ladder Creek Fire on the Nez Perce National Forest began August 13. There were four major new starts August 15: Hellroaring on the Gallatin, Lost Canyon on the Rocky Boy Indian Reservation, Lulu on the Northern Cheyenne Indian Reservation, and South Lost Horse on the Bitterroot National Forest.

The Boston Lake incident began August 23 on the Nez Perce National Forest. This fire ultimately grew to nearly 30,000 acres. It eventually burned into the Ladder Creek Fire for a combined size of more than 50,000 acres. Before they were over, Boston Lake and Ladder had three different incident commanders and were not controlled until October 24.

On August 29, strong winds drove the Canyon Creek Fire across the Dearborn River, and out of the Wilderness. At 2 a.m., August 29, Seth Diamond of the Rocky Mountain Ranger District was leading two crews of firefighters into the Canyon Creek Fire. He reported, "The sky was brilliant orange-red. Although it was night, it was like daylight. We could hear the roar as the flames raced through the trees." On August 30, Canyon Creek was declared a wildfire. On September 6, erratic winds blew the perimeter from 60,000 acres to 230,000 acres, burned outbuildings, forced an emergency fire shelter deployment and necessitated fire crew evacuation. Before it was over, it became the largest fire in the Region, 247,219 acres.



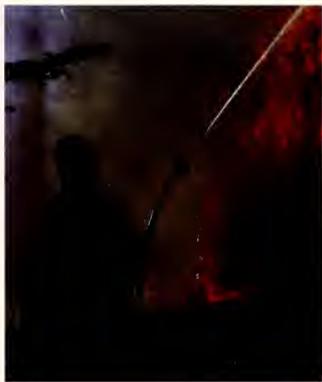


Photo by John Nelson



*"From about the first of July, I think I only spent 4 or 5 days home."*

Willis Curdy, smokejumper



Photo by John Nelson



Red Bench Fire began September 6 and ultimately burned into Glacier National Park, consuming 37,500 acres. In addition to the tragic fatality of Patrick David, several other firefighters were injured by falling snags. The fire consumed the pole bridge across the North Fork of the Flathead River, from which the town of Polebridge derives its name. Remarkably, Polebridge General Store was saved, although several homes and outbuildings were lost.

On September 10, the largest commitment of personnel, supplies, and equipment—nearly 16,000 people were involved in the fire effort. Twenty major fires were burning in the Region on that date, not including those in Yellowstone National Park.

By late September, longer nights, cooler days, higher humidities, and less wind finally gave us the break we had prayed for, improving conditions for containment and control. The larger fires, however—Canyon Creek, Red Bench, and Gates Park—would require wetting rain or snow and would not be controlled until November.

We saw the heaviest commitment of fire suppression resources in the Region's 80-year history. All sorts of records were broken. Every available trained crew and overhead team was used. The Montana and Idaho National Guard, two battalions of regular military, and trained crews from Canada were called into action before it was over. The inter-agency cooperation and approach to the total effort was outstanding. Eight Federal, eight State, and numerous county and local agencies joined together in a common cause.

The last fire, Red Bench, was finally controlled on December 1. Thus ended the 1988 fire season.



*"Once it gets going, it just generates energy through itself, it just builds like a snowball rolling down a hill."*

George Weldon, Resource Asst.





*"Four days later,  
the damn wind  
changed direction.  
Up the canyon it  
went. Never did  
stop until the snow  
flies."*

Blase DiLulo,  
Forestry Technician



Re smokejumpers: *"If  
they were physically fit  
after they got off of a fire,  
they were sent out again.  
They were just given  
enough time to change  
clothes."*

Ollie Goldammer,  
Forest Dispatcher



Photo by Bill Sallaz



The people of the United States were understanding and supportive. Help came from all 50 States, Washington D.C. and the Virgin Islands. Our neighbors in Canada also pitched in. The area's residents endured the inconvenience of fire and restrictions with minimum complaint.

An aggressive recovery and restoration effort was initiated before the last fires were out. Fire crews began seeding firelines and installing erosion control structures. Salvage timber sales were prepared.

According to Bob Schrenk, coordinator of the Regional Fire Recovery Team, "The fires of 1988 had both positive and negative effects. The goal of the Forest Service recovery effort is to do short- and long-term work to prevent resource damage and to insure that management objectives of the Forest Plans are met."

In 1988, the Region experienced more days of extreme burning conditions than any other year in recorded history. New maximum levels of energy release, burning indices, and rates of spread were established at many fire danger recording stations. Fire behavior observed this year baffled the experts with its unprecedented and never-before-observed intensity. We obtained new knowledge and new experience in the summer of '88. If need be, we can do it again and do it better because of what we've learned.



Photo by Bill Sallaz

## 1988 Wildfire Summary

The following includes Montana, North Idaho, North Dakota, NW South Dakota, and the Greater Yellowstone Area:

### PERSONNEL:

Max. no. of crews on fires .....	479 on Sept. 4, 1988
Total no. of personnel on fires at peak of season .....	15,700 on Sept. 10, 1988
Max. no. of jumpers on fires at one time .....	203 on Aug. 30, 1988
Total military personnel on fires .....	8 Battalions (6 Army, 2 Marines) 6,150
Max. no. of Montana National Guard on fires .....	442 on Sept. 10, 1988
Max. no. of Idaho National Guard on fires, Northern Region .....	40

### FIRES: (The following is as of October 31, 1988.)

Total fires USDA Forest Service, Region One .....	1,422 fires (776,614 acres)
Total fires in Montana (all agencies) .....	2814 fires (600,322 acres)
Total fires, USDA Forest Service, North Idaho .....	422 fires (117,810 acres)

### EQUIPMENT:

Max. no. of engines at one time .....	448 on Sept. 13, 1988
Max. no. helicopters .....	96 on Sept. 16, 1988
Max. no. of Montana National Guard vehicles used .....	174 on Sept. 10, 1988
Max. no. of Montana National Guard helicopters used .....	8 on Sept. 10, 1988
Max. no. Idaho National Guard vehicles, Northern Region .....	16
Max. no. Idaho National Guard helicopters used .....	2

### COSTS:

Approximate cost to Forest Service, Northern Region .....

\$74 million as of 9/30/88

### OTHER:

Total retardant dropped .....	4,869,700 gallons
Supplies shipped from Missoula Fire Cache .....	19,212,420 lbs. as of 9/22/88
Aircraft hours flown: Smokejumper & jumper cargo .....	1,200
Air tanker .....	4,300
MAFFS .....	450
Lead Plane .....	5,000
Transport (light & heavy) .....	3,000
Helicopter .....	11,000 (This does not include military hours)
Total .....	24,950

(Figures are tentative, subject to final verification.)









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